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ABSTRACT

Although the recent thrust toward writing as interaction with a text has led to de-emphasis of personal-experience writing per se, autobiography, if approached in the context of textuality (in Roland Barthes's sense), can provide a model for writing as a means of discovering one's identity--of interacting with life as text and with the written text to discover and to create an identity. Loren Eiseley's "The Star Thrower" and "All the Strange Hours" provide models of this discovery and creation of a self. In Eiseley's autobiographical texts, the narrator is aware of his own fragmented identity and tries on identities, examining each and finally creating an identity from the textual fragments. This process is not beyond the student of composition. It does require recognition of the textuality of personal writing, interaction with the text, discovery of falterings and suppressions of thought in a personal text. Approached in this light, autobiography becomes a model for discovery and creation of a self through the writing process. (Eighteen references are attached.) (RAE)

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DISCOVERY OF THE SELF THROUGH THE WRITING PROCESS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A HEURISTIC OF IDENTITY

ABSTRACT

Although the recent thrust toward writing as interaction with a text has led to de-emphasis of personal-experience writing per se, autobiography, if approached in the context of textuality (in Barthes's sense), can provide a model for writing as a means of discovering one's identity--of interacting with life as text and with the written text to discover and to create an identity.

This paper examines Loren Eiseley's "The Star Thrower" and All the Strange Hours as models of this discovery and creation of a self. Terry Eagleton warns of the problematic of the I: "Not only can I never be fully present to you, but I can never be fully present to myself" (Literary Theory 130). In Eiseley's autobiographical texts, the narrator is aware of his own fragmented identity and tries on identities, examining each and finally creating an identity from the textual fragments. This process is not beyond the student of composition. It does require recognition of the textuality of one's own writing, interaction with the text, discovery of falterings and suppressions of thought in one's own text. Approached in this light, autobiography becomes a model for discovery and creation of a self through the writing process.

This paper draws on contemporary literary as well as composition studies to appeal to a broad range of interests.

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DISCOVERY OF SELF THROUGH THE WRITING PROCESS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS A HEURISTIC OF IDENTITY

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"The most enormous extension of vision of which life is capable . . . is the projection of itself into other lives."

Loren Eiseley, The Immense Journey

Although the recent thrust toward writing across the disciplines or writing as interaction with a text may lead to de-emphasis of personal-experience writing per se, autobiography, if approached in the context of textuality, can provide a model for writing as a means of discovering one's identity--of interacting with life as text and with the written text to discover and to create an identity. Students may have difficulty looking at their own personal experiences and drawing out the significance of events, but they can examine a model of such perception of significance and link it to their own texts. As the student interacts with it, the autobiographical text can serve as a link between the student's own life experiences and the concept of the text.

Textuality as explained by Roland Barthes and Michel Serres is essential to the view I suggest. In a statement that blurs the distinction between "literary" and "nonliterary" language and texts, Michel Serres writes, "There are texts, and that is all" (38). If the New Critics were unable to distinguish "poetic" language clearly from other language; if rhythm is as characteristic of prose as of verse; if metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony form a continuum parallel to Piaget's

concepts of the development of cognitive powers, as Hayden White has suggested (6-13); if Newton's metaphor of the world machine and Darwin's of the struggle in the tangled bank shape human thought as David Edge has suggested (135-47); if philosophy's metaphors control Western thought, as Derrida contends--then the lines between "literary" or "poetic" and "nonliterary" are indeed blurred. There are, after all, only texts. By blurring the distinctions between texts and by introducing the death of the author as a god-like persona ("The Death of the Author" 148), Roland Barthes offers a concept of textuality that undermines the fixed line between His Text and my text and enables the author to return to her own text as a "guest" ("From Work to Text" 161). As the reader participates anew in the reading-creating process and the "Author" is separated from a mystified code of unmediated knowledge available to only a privileged few, the student is able to participate in and to identify with the text of autobiography.

The usefulness of this concept of textuality in the heuristic of identity is the discovery and even the creation of an identity through writing. As lines of demarcation between Great Author and humble reader are blurred, the reader becomes less separate from the text, more a creator of the text. The rhetorical I has always been problematic. Roland Barthes writes that using I as a sign "is an act which is always new," but "the I of the one who writes is not the same as the I which is read by thou" ("To Write" 163). And Terry Eagleton warns, "Not only can I never be fully present to you, but I can never be fully present

to myself" (130). The I of autobiography may discover or create an identity as she develops expertise in the writing process. The textual model that I will consider is the uncertain I of Loren Eiseley's autobiographical texts, specifically the essay "The Star Thrower" and the later autobiography, All the Strange Hours. In Eiseley's autobiographical texts, the narrator is aware of his own fragmented identity and tries on identities, examining each and finally creating an identity from the textual fragments. And this process is not beyond the student of composition. It does require recognition of one's writing as text, interaction with the text of autobiography (another's and one's own), and discovery of falterings and suppressions of thought in one's own text.

Exploration of identities is a sub-theme in many of Eiseley's texts, but it is especially effective in "The Star Thrower" and in the autobiography. In "The Star Thrower," Eiseley the scientist sees himself in the Buddhist sage's image of "the skull and the eye." On coming to the landscape (literal and metaphorical) that "invites shipwreck," he writes, "I was the skull. I was the inhumanly stripped skeleton without voice, without hope, wandering alone upon the shores of the world. I was devoid of pity, because pity implies hope" (68). Haunted by the recollection of a torn photograph in which he sees the eye of his mother--an eye that pleads for sympathy and speaks wordlessly of her deafness and isolation--the narrator expresses his discontent with the professional identity he has assumed, an

identity that, he feels, has led him to deny human sympathy and to stress only the "eye" of detached scientific observation--the eye in the skull.

This confrontation of an identity, this assessment of who he seems to be at this time, is an essential autobiographical element in the narrative. As Joan Didion reminds us, the important thing is "what it was to be me," whether that identity was actual or imagined (376). In Eiseley's texts, the individual's identity shifts as do evolutionary forms, and identity itself evolves. Surrounded by shell collectors who boil "beautiful voiceless things alive" (73) in their eagerness to collect, the narrator confronts the unexpected, the scientifically inexplicable, in the form of an old man whose raison d'etre is "saving" beached starfish by throwing them back into the sea. Haunted by the old man and by the "torn eye" of the photograph, he confronts the faltering of science and asserts human feeling against the objectivity of science and the Biblical admonition "Love not the world": "But I do love the world," he responds. "I love the lost ones, the failures of the world" (86). The response itself asks the reader for concurrence, and the attitude is reinforced as the narrator goes out to join the "star thrower." In a world of Darwinian struggle, Eiseley asserts the value of knowledge beyond that of scientific observation. He confronts his own faltering identity as scientist as he realizes that writing his affirmation of love for the world's "failures" is "like the renunciation of my scientific

heritage" (86). In questioning the attitudes that have resulted from his professional activities, Eiseley as narrator provides a model for questioning, at any age, of what one has chosen to be and to feel. And he falters in faltering, for his identification with "the lost ones" is only like the renunciation of his heritage. Nevertheless, the "star thrower," he writes, "had reasserted the human right to define his own frontier" (87).

This right belongs not only to the professional writer; it is a right that Eiseley exemplifies in the star thrower's action, as well as in his own self-examination and his own discontent with what he had become. Further, he interweaves this reexamination of his identity with narration, providing a model for creating a web of story and insight, of self-examination and confession. Students find narrative pleasant to write, but insight is harder to achieve. Eiseley provides a model for creating this web of story and insight through self-examination and confession. Although we as professionals may see Eiseley's confession of his "renunciation" as a rhetorical device that draws the reader into sympathy with his advocacy of Bacon's "uses of life," we, and our students, may also see confession as a step toward examination of one's feelings about oneself. Assuredly, the I is a strategy of gaining identification or sympathy and thus of drawing the reader into the quest for insight. As this I manipulates the reader, he constantly projects the uncertainty of his own identity and thus draws the reader into the quest for self or for knowledge. Paralleling "the maturation of creative

consciousness, the growth of the artist, to the evolution of the entire universe," James M. Schwartz notes the necessary involvement the self of Eiseley's narrator with the self of the reader, for "space and time, perception and recollection, become important only when projected onto the screen of individual human consciousness" (11, 70-71).

In his autobiography, as the subtitle, The Excavation of a Life, suggests, Eiseley turns from confession to archaeological excavation as a model for discovering one's identity--for delving into the levels of identities that lie beneath the individual's awareness. In his excavation of the self, Eiseley assumes, in turn, the identities of gambler, scholar, and fugitive: a gambler, as a child playing with dice in an abandoned house and as an adult attempting to shift the odds against death by altering an awkward corner at an intersection; a scholar part by accident and part by choice, yet always wondering what would have been if chance had led him to return to riding the rails or to become a merchant marine; a fugitive in recalling a prison escape and a shootout in the Nebraska snow that had remained in his memory since the age of five. He concludes that "in this attempt to understand, to become civilized, to be reflective, one becomes by turns gambler, fugitive, and scholar (249). The I is a visual "eye" that is a dramatized observer--part self, part observer and participant, part fictional creation--trying on and acting out each identity in turn.

Archaeology discovers sedimentation and fragmentation. In the autobiography, what Eiseley discovers is a fragmentation of identity. The mirror is a recurrent metaphor throughout his texts, but in All the Strange Hours it effectively associates the visual "eye" with the homophone of the "I." In Lacanian terms the stade du miroir marks the child's passage from the domain of images, the Imaginary, into the domain of language, the Symbolic, as the infant, held before a mirror, sees itself and begins to perceive itself in perceiving the Other.[1] Passage from the realm of the Imaginary into the realm of the symbolic is itself a fragmentation. "What lies 'beyond' the mirror stage is a loss of totality, the fragmentation of the body and the self," as one accepts "the possibility which language brings of the discontinuity of the self" (Culler 165). This concept of fragmentation and discontinuity is emphasized in All the Strange Hours by the metaphor of the shattered mirror, which reflects the narrator's fragmented self and his "excavation" of multiple identities. Indeed, All the Strange Hours may be seen in Lacanian terms as Eiseley's evocation of the stade du miroir, his reflection of his own passage from the Imaginary into the Symbolic, where, as Carlisle suggests, he creates an identity through language (76). The point here is that, in the Symbolic realm, one does create an identity from linguistic fragmentation.

Eiseley's metaphor is established in the opening chapter, in which the narrator describes one of his earliest memories: "a beautiful silver-backed Victorian hand mirror" whose glass his

mother had shattered out of deafness and frustration (All the Strange Hours 3). He remembers "looking into the mirror as a child, admiring the scrollwork on the silver," and he makes clear the mirror's importance as a symbol of identity as he recalls: "Finally it disappeared. The face of a child vanished with it, my own face. Without the mirror I was unaware when it departed" (3). Near the end of the autobiography, he notes that subconsciously nothing departs, and the mind in age is left "picking endlessly over the splintered glass of a mirror dropped and broken long ago" (4). The mirror is not only the image of a search for identity (he was unaware when his child's face departed, because the mirror was gone), but also the symbol of a life that is "splintered" in the memory.

Eiseley establishes the I of the autobiography as "all men and no man" (23), the part that, in a sense, reflects the whole, the individual who, in his own experiences, recreates the experiences of humankind. Similarly, in the shattered mirror, each part reflects the whole, so that the image becomes a means of access to an autobiography that is not linear, but a series of fragments, each reflecting a part and, in a sense, the whole of the individual's quest for identity. Because each piece of this splintered glass can reproduce the full image, as the part in a hologram reproduces the whole, the splintered memories in a sense reproduce a life--both individually and collectively. Thus the creation of an identity from the fragmented linguistic realm of the Symbolic parallels the holographic model, which suggests the

shifting or winking of the image with the viewer's movements and therefore the interaction of the viewer or "reader" and her material. This textual insight becomes a model for the less skilled writer to see fragmentation as a tool rather than a hindrance--as a means of discovering and creating a sense of the whole identity.

In the final chapter Eiseley returns to "the shattered mirror which can never be repaired but which lies in bits in the hallways of the mind itself," as he approaches the vehicle on the literal level:

> Feet crunch upon the glass as in an abandoned house; sometimes a ray of light strikes through a closed shutter and something still glitters, devastatingly beautiful, upon the floor. Or, similarly, a moonlit dream turns the fragments to soft shadows out of which come voices. (258)

The abandoned house we know to be the universe; the metaphor began in the Prologue to The Invisible Pyramid. Out of the fragments comes the unexpected or the beautiful, though "an hour comes when reality, the reality we know, gives way to combinations no longer causal or successive in character" (258-59). The fragmented mirror and the abandoned house piece together the fragments of an identity that remains shifting while, throughout the book, the narrator (as synecdoche for all men) reflects a reality that is not "causal or successive."

Each piece fits, perhaps haphazardly, into the whole, as in the shattered mirror or the hologram each piece also reconstructs the whole. Indeed, through the paradoxical--almost holographic--metaphor Eiseley comes close to modeling the holistic Eastern out of the fragmented Western vision of life. The mirror is not an exact representation, but a source of distortion, a trick for the eye. The shattered mirror is another model of the discontinuities in an unexpected universe, yet of the holistic view of all life that Eiseley seeks.

From archaeological excavation to the shattered mirror whose pieces individually reflect the whole and collectively constitute an almost holographic sense of the whole, Eiseley provides a model of exploration of the self through writing. It is through writing that he confronts the faltering of his scientific identity, that he suppresses the dispassionate scientist he has become and deliberately chooses humane sympathy. If the professional confesses such faltering and suppression, the model suggests the acceptability of both in autobiographical writing. It is through writing that Eiseley draws the fragments together to form a whole that shifts, like a hologram, even as it is read. Faltering, suppression, and fragmentation are valorized in the textual insight of the (holographic) whole that shifts as the reader engages it. The student can learn to identify manipulation of such faltering, suppression, and fragmentation for rhetorical ends. Yet even if the rhetorical strategy is not immediately obvious, Eiseley's autobiographical texts serve as a

model for reexamining, excavating, and, in the Symbolic register of language, creating one's own identity.

NOTE

1. See *Ecrits* 93-100. A helpful translator's note distinguishes the Imaginary, and Symbolic, and the Real in *The Four Fundamental Principles of Psychoanalysis* (279-80).

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